



OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES.

AT a meeting of the MASSACHUSETTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY, held October 11, 1894, Mr. HENRY LEE spoke in substance as follows:—

After the President's discriminating remarks and Dr. Everett's sympathetic verses, my only excuse for saying a few words is that my point of view is not that of a scholar, but of a friend and kinsman.

Our common ancestor, Edward Jackson, of Harvard College, 1726, married Dorothy Quincy, whom Dr. Holmes has embalmed. He had two children; the son was my grandfather, the daughter his grandmother. Always on familiar terms, for seventeen summers we have been neighbors at Beverly Farms, in closer communion, holding stated meetings every Sunday after church, — which, by the way, he invariably attended, whatever the creed or whoever the preacher. He will be missed from his accustomed seat in the old King's Chapel, which he has filled for over fifty years.

At these weekly sessions discussion ranged far and wide. There was no assumption of superiority on his part, such as I have sometimes encountered from literary men; but there was, on each side, an eagerness to talk which had to be regulated, after parliamentary usage, by the mistress of the house.

An old gentleman, speaking of Judge Charles Jackson, the father of Mrs. Holmes, told me that when, as referee, he decided a case, both parties were satisfied, such was their confidence in his equity; and his daughter presided over this court of appeal with like acquiescence.

In this intimacy I traversed the opinions and convictions, the sympathies and gentle antipathies, of my brilliant, discursive cousin, the Autocrat; observed his domestic habits and relations, and learned the rewards and penalties of his popularity.

He was most happy in his marriage. The executive ability and unselfish devotion manifested by his wife when at the head of the Boston Sanitary Commission, during the Civil War, were lavished upon her family; her delicate perceptions and quick sympathies made her a delightful companion and a competent critic of her husband's prose or poetry.

It was pleasant to meet them in their daily walks, gayly chatting with each other or with a neighbor, or stooping to caress a little child. These daily walks have been persevered in to the end, in spite of solitude, partial blindness, and increasing infirmities; and so have his kindly relations with neighbors, his playful and tender intercourse with children.

I have had two sets of grandchildren dwelling near him, and I will venture to say that he never passed them without a pleasant word; and he not only saluted them, but he noticed their traits.

A neighbor told me that when Dr. Holmes dwelt in Charles Street, and passed daily through Cambridge Street to the Medical School, he was wont to stop on his way to speak to the school-children, to give them words to spell, to laugh over their blunders, and to reward them with pennies. He was blessed with a real gayety of heart, — a quality too rare among us descendants of Puritans, — inherited, perhaps, from his Dutch ancestors.

He had much mechanical ingenuity, — made several inventions, besides improving the stereoscope; but in some business ways he was amusingly helpless, and, as I have occasion to know, very grateful for assistance.

His kindness of heart was exercised, but not exhausted, by the bores who besieged him with visits and letters, — who showered upon him their essays to be read, their aspirations to be considered, and often rewarded his patient endurance and merciful judgments with an outburst of ingratitude. His charity for these and other offences was habitual; he was

quite capable of receiving, but not of inflicting, wounds ; nor did he harbor resentments.

He has been called vain, by himself and others ; but it was vanity of an amiable and childlike kind, — confessed, and so apologized for ; not denied or disguised or justified. It was not made offensive by superciliousness, nor contemptible by unmanliness, nor malignant by envy. Had he visited Rotten Row, and gazed at the well-born, well-dressed, well-mounted equestrians, he would have exulted over their bright array, and not have growled out, as Carlyle did, "There is not one of them can do what I can do." He would not, like Moore, have abused his honest and generous publisher ; nor would he, like him, upon the loss of a child, have lain abed to revel in his grief, leaving his "dear Bessie," as he called his wife, to perform the last sad offices. He would not — as did one author with whom I had formerly lived on terms of equality, but who afterward acquired fame and riches — have called upon me to mark him extraordinary, not in the roll of common men, by cutting off the coupons from his goodly pile of bonds, — a service not rendered to his four thousand fellow-customers.

Lowell wrote a witty paper on "A Certain Condescension in Foreigners" ; he might have followed it by "A Certain Condescension in Literary Men."

When I read the correspondence between Emerson and Carlyle, it struck me how much more and better they would have written had they been bound to some task every morning ; if manual, all the better. Emerson recognizes this in many passages : "The use of manual labor is one which never grows obsolete, and which is inapplicable to no person. . . . We must have a basis for our higher accomplishments, our delicate entertainments of poetry and philosophy, in the work of our hands. Not only health, but enterprise is in the work."

Fortunate for Charles Lamb was his enforced drudgery "at the desk's dead wood." It was this routine that braced him for his congenial labors. After his long-coveted liberation, he ran and frisked about like a colt in a pasture, and then subsided ; the "unchartered freedom" made him restless, but not productive.

Fortunate for Dr. Holmes his practice and his lectures for thirty-five years. It gave him promptness, accountability, resolution, touch with the world. It was this commerce with the world that widened his observations and his sympathy; it was this which inclined him, it was this discipline which enabled him, to respond so constantly and so heartily to the appeal for occasions, — a well-performed service which endeared him to the great public.

The champagne, the effervescence, will be lacking at many a gathering now that he is gone; he stands out from all other poets by his cheerful and hearty co-operation.

Who now can catch inspiration from the passing event, and express felicitously the feeling agitating every breast, as did our lost friend?

One more trait, and that a most amiable one, characterized him, — a remarkable magnanimity; he gave an ungrudging tribute of praise to his brethren, he had "the most catholic receptivity for the genius of others."

In short, he was very human in weakness and in strength; love and good-will he freely bestowed, and love and good-will he craved in turn, and he received in full measure.

"I do not know what special gifts have been granted or denied me, but this I know, — that I am like so many others of my fellow-creatures that when I smile I feel as if they must, when I cry I think their eyes fill; and it always seems to me that when I am most truly myself, I come nearest to them, and am surest of being listened to by the brothers and sisters of the larger family into which I was born so long ago."

"He sings no more on earth; our vain desire
Aches for the voice we loved so long to hear."